View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk
brought to you by CORE
provided by ChesterRep

Clough, David. L., '**Rethinking Our Treatment of Animals in Light of *Laudato Si'***". In *Laudato Si' and the Environment: Pope Francis' Green Encyclical*, Routledge New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies, edited by R. McKim, 95-104. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020.

[top p. 95]

The encyclical *Laudato Si'* builds on and extends previous Roman Catholic church teaching on animals to affirm their value as beloved creatures of God and reject anthropocentric claims that they were created merely to provide for human needs. It draws on the Franciscan tradition to affirm other animals as our sisters and brothers, and notes that these relationships have implications for our treatment of animals. The encyclical fails to connect concern for other-than-human animals with critiques of industrial animal agriculture, however, which is an odd omission given its consideration of other practical issues such as the genetic manipulation of plant and animals, its express concern for biodiversity, and its call for an ecological conversion in the context of climate change. In this chapter, I begin by surveying the valuable framework the encyclical sets up for understanding the place of animals in Christian theology and ethics. I then describe how we are using animals for food today. Finally, I make the case that the encyclical's framework demands obvious and urgent changes in the way we make use of other animals for food.

What does the encyclical say about animals?

The most striking aspect of the understanding of animals in *Laudato Si'* is its deep grounding in a Franciscan account of our affective relationships with fellow creatures. This suggests that the

Pope's decision to take the name "Francis" represented a profound theological commitment. The encyclical opens by recalling that St Francis of Assisi refers to the earth as mother and sister (1). A few paragraphs later, it recalls in more detail the way Francis would burst into praise after contemplating "the sun, moon, or the smallest of animals," communing with all creation. For Francis, "each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection," and for that reason "he felt called to care for all that exists" (11). This emphasis on affection and relationship is an ongoing theme in the encyclical: all creatures belong to God, which grounds the conviction that

> as part of the universe, called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect.
>
> (89)

[top p. 96]

This communion is fully inclusive: "When our hearts are authentically open to universal communion, this sense of fraternity excludes nothing and no one" (92). Scriptural mandates about care for donkeys, oxen, mother birds and their young, and sabbath rest for domesticated animals show that biblical laws "dwell on relationships, not only among individuals but also with other living beings" (68). The bonds of affection joining humans with other creatures are rooted in their relationship with God: "Each organism, as a creature of God, is good and admirable in itself" (140). This extends even to the humblest of creatures:

> Every creature is thus the object of the Father's tenderness, who gives it its place in the world. Even the fleeting life of the least of beings is the object of his love, and in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with his affection.
>
> (77)

The encyclical does not flinch from the negative affections our relationship with other creatures provokes:

> This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she 'groans in travail' (Rom 8:22). We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters.
>
> (2)

This is a profound appreciation that the bonds of affection that unite us with other creatures cause us pain when we recognize that those we love are suffering at our hands. It is this relationship of love with all fellow creatures that shows us the wrongness of relating to nature as "masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, [who are] unable to set limits on their immediate needs" and the need instead to take on the radical poverty of Francis, which was "a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled" (11).

The stern critique of "tyrannical anthropocentrism" in the encyclical is a second and closely related theme. It repeatedly affirms the need to reinterpret the Christian theological tradition in the context of the environmental crisis in which we find ourselves:

> Although it is true that we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion

[top p. 97]

> that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures. The biblical texts are to be read in their context, with an appropriate hermeneutic, recognizing that they tell us to "till and keep" the garden of the world (cf. Gen 2:15).
>
> (67)

A similar point is made later as part of the case that it is modern anthropocentrism alongside the technocratic paradigm that are the roots of the ecological crisis (Chapter 3, 101–136):

> An inadequate presentation of Christian anthropology gave rise to a wrong understanding of the relationship between human beings and the world. Often, what was handed on was a Promethean vision of mastery over the world, which gave the impression that the protection of nature was something that only the faint-hearted cared about. Instead, our "dominion" over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship.
>
> (116)

Modern anthropocentrism is a contradiction of recognition of creaturely bonds of affection: "Clearly, the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other

creatures" (68). The encyclical notes that the Roman Catholic Catechism "clearly and forcefully criticizes a distorted anthropocentrism" in stating that "[each] creature possesses its own particular goodness and perfection…Each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God's infinite wisdom and goodness." The encyclical also quotes the Catechism's recognition of the ethical implication of this teaching to "respect the particular goodness of every creature" and "avoid any disordered use of things" (69, quoting the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 339).

It is notable that the anthropocentrism the encyclical criticizes is of variously qualified kinds—"modern," "tyrannical," "distorted," "excessive," "misguided"—rather than anthropocentrism as such. Acceptable forms of anthropocentrism are not spelled out or defended, but the encyclical does seek to avoid its language about a universal communion between all creatures being interpreted as erasing differences in value between humans and other creatures: "This is not to put all living beings on the same level nor to deprive human beings of their unique worth and the tremendous responsibility it entails" (90). The encyclical also affirms the importance of keeping a concern for human well-being connected to concerns for other creatures:

> A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings. It is clearly inconsistent to combat trafficking in endangered species while remaining completely indifferent to human trafficking,

[top p. 98]

> unconcerned about the poor, or undertaking to destroy another human being deemed unwanted. This compromises the very meaning of our struggle for the sake of the environment.

(91)

The reference to unwanted humans connects Roman Catholic opposition to abortion to concern for animals, which is in accordance with the new consistent pro-life ethic argued for by a growing number of theologians (e.g., Camosy, 2013). The encyclical's linking of concern for vulnerable humans and animals is defensive at this point: questioning the validity of concern for animals that does not also oppose abortion. Like many Christian ethicists, I recognize that feminist concerns about the control of women's bodies need to be weighed heavily in considering the ethics of abortion. In most cases of the exploitation of animals, there is no parallel countervailing consideration. For that reason, I disagree with the position of the encyclical that approving abortion in any circumstances makes concern for animals inconsistent. The wider point, however, that concern for human well-being, the well-being of other animals, and the well-being of the environment as a whole need to be held together is welcome and important.

A third key theme in the treatment of animals in the encyclical is the affirmation of their place in the work of God in Jesus Christ and in Christian doctrines of redemption. The encyclical affirms that "the destiny of all creation is bound up with the mystery of Christ"; that the Johannine formula that "the Word became flesh" indicates that "one person of the trinity entered into the created cosmos, throwing in his lot with it, even to the cross"; and that therefore "particularly through the incarnation, the mystery of Christ is at work in a hidden manner in the natural world as a whole, without thereby impinging on its autonomy" (99). God's solidarity with creatures in the incarnation is closely connected to the inclusion of all creatures in God's redemptive purposes:

> The ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us. Rather, all creatures are moving forward with us and through us towards a common point of arrival, which is God, in

> that transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illumines all things. Human beings, endowed with intelligence and love, and drawn by the fullness of Christ, are called to lead all creatures back to their Creator.
>
> (83)

To the best of my knowledge, this strong affirmation of the place of all creatures in God's redemptive purposes goes beyond previous papal teaching. In December 2014, the New York Times and other newspapers around the world reported that during a papal audience the Pope had told a distraught young boy whose dog had recently died that "One day, we will see our animals again in the eternity of Christ. Paradise is open to all of God's

[top p. 99]

creatures." In fact, the story turned out to be an error and was subsequently corrected, but only a few months later, *Laudato Si'* affirmed a theology of redemption with a place for dogs alongside God's other creatures. There is no suggestion in the encyclical that the redemption of creatures other than the human is effected merely through the redemption of humans, or merely as species representatives rather than individuals, as some Christian accounts of redemption suggest. Instead, "all creatures" are being led with us "back to their Creator," suggesting that our bonds of affection with other-than-human creatures celebrated in the encyclical will be part of the new creation and children weeping over the loss of their companion animals can be reassured. *Laudato Si'* can be recognized, therefore, as a striking new moment in church teaching not only in relation to the interconnections between human and environmental well-being but also in relation to animals. Its celebration of a Franciscan recognition of our affective bonds of kinship with fellow creatures, its rejection of presentations of Christianity legitimizing human domination over other animals, and its affirmation of the place of animals in God's work of

redemption through Christ are each significant points of reference for considering the ethics of our treatment of animals. In the next section, I make the case that these commitments in the encyclical have obvious and urgent implications for changing the use Christians make of other animals for food.

How are we using other animals for food?

Humans make use of other animals in all kinds of ways. In Volume II of *On Animals*, treating theological ethics, I describe and evaluate the ways we make use of animals for clothing and textiles, for labor, for research experimentation, for sport and entertainment, as pets and companions, and the impacts of human activity on wild animals. The longest chapter in the book by some margin, however, is the one devoted to the use we make of other animals for food. This is because the numbers of animals used for this purpose is several orders of magnitude greater than those used for other purposes—between six and eight trillion per year on my estimates—because of the impoverished lives imposed on the vast majority of farmed animals and because of the wider impacts of human behavior on wild animals as well as humans and the environment. One illuminating perspective on the scope of our use of other animals for food comes from biomass estimates by Vaclav Smil (2011). By 1900, the combined biomass of all domesticated animals had grown to exceed the biomass of wild land mammals by 3.5 times. That was the result of a combination of big increases in livestock numbers, and big decreases in wild land animals, significantly driven by the need to make space for all those livestock: we displaced wild animals in order to make space for raising domesticated animals for food. In the following 100 years, a near quadrupling in the biomass of domesticated animals was a major factor in the halving of wild land mammal biomass so that by 2000,

[top p. 100]

the biomass of domesticated animals was 24 times greater than that of all wild land mammals. Domesticated chickens alone are nearly three times the biomass of all wild birds. And in the same 100 years, we reduced numbers of fish in the oceans by 90% (Bar-On, 2018; Lotze & Worm, 2009). Raising livestock in these numbers is a major contributor to an anthropogenic mass extinction event comparable with those found in the geological record. If we continue on this trajectory, there will be virtually no wild animals to be concerned about. If we combine this with the realization of the cruelly impoverished lives we inflict on farmed animals, the vast majority of which are raised in unnatural and crowded industrial environments, we can see that our use of other animals for food is an obvious priority for our attention on grounds of scale, intensity, and impact.

Once we have seen that the human use of other animals for food has a priority claim on our attention, the next step is to examine our practice and its impacts. In the context of the encyclical's concern for thinking in a connected way about animal creatures, human welfare, and the environment, the remainder of this section will provide a survey of what we are doing in relation to these three categories.

Approximately 98%–99% of all animals killed for food are fish. About half of these are wild-caught, and half raised in intensive farms. Both are problematic: wild-caught fish suffer significantly in the capture process and over-fishing in many contexts has led to the literal decimation of populations, as well as the destruction of non-target species and sea beds. Farmed fish live in crowded and monotonous environments that subject them to increased risk of disease. Fish farming also contributes to the depletion of wild fish stocks because on average farmed fish are fed twice as much wild-caught fish. Chickens are the most numerously farmed animal, with

66 billion killed for meat in 2014 and a further eight billion used for eggs (Clough, 2019). The vast majority of these birds are raised in industrial broiler sheds or battery cages. Modern broiler chickens have had their bodies and physiology entirely reconfigured so they eat rapidly and reach slaughter weight in as little as 35 days. They are raised in huge warehouses with artificial day and night manipulated to optimize their growth, automated feeding and water, and human interaction reduced to carrying out the dead once or twice a day. As their bodies grow beyond the capacity of the legs to bear their weight they suffer significant pain, before being roughly crated for the journey to slaughter, where automated stunning techniques often fail to ensure they are unconscious before their throats are cut. Male chicks of laying strains of hens are useless to the industry, so are killed at a day old by being gassed, dropped live into a grinder, or just left to die in refuse sacks. Most laying hens live in small crowded battery cages for their 18 month laying life, before being slaughtered. Most ducks are raised for meat in similar intensive conditions, together with other poultry.

Pigs are the mammals most commonly killed for meat, with 1.5 billion slaughtered in 2014. The majority of these animals are also raised in

[top p. 101]

industrial sheds with no opportunity for their preferred behaviors, such as rooting in the earth, and in environments so monotonous that their tails have to be docked to avoid them being chewed off by their fellow inmates. Rabbits are the next most numerous farmed animal, with nearly a billion killed in 2014, most of whom are raised in small cages. Sheep and goats are more commonly raised extensively outdoors, but intensive systems are growing in popularity for dairy production, and many sheep are now subjected to live export involving long journeys by road or on the decks of ships before facing uncertain welfare at slaughter. Intensive dairy facilities for

cows are even more common. These cows never go outside or graze grass, are forcibly artificially inseminated, have their calves taken from them at birth, and are killed for beef when their milk productivity falls after three or four lactations on average. Beef cattle often do have access to the outdoors, but are now commonly fed grain rather than grass for at least part of their lives in bare feedlots to fatten them for slaughter.

The most direct human impacts of these novel ways of raising and killing animals are on the humans who work in the industry. They are subjected to high risks of physical and mental injury while working on fast-moving production lines with mechanized knives for low pay. Those who do these unattractive and dangerous jobs in most contexts are disproportionately women, members of ethnic minorities, and migrants. Raising animals as we are doing currently is also a problem for global food and water supplies: 78% of agricultural land is now devoted to animal agriculture and over a third of global cereal output is now fed to livestock, 92% of which is wasted in comparison to the nutrition that would be derived if humans consumed the grain directly. Producing one kg of beef requires 10–20 times the water required by producing the same calories from plant-based sources.

Industrial methods of raising animals are also raising threats from zoonotic diseases such as swine and bird flu that are likely to cause major human pandemics with high mortality rates. The antibiotics that must be fed to intensively farmed animals to control infections in their crowded environments are contributing to the growth of antibiotic-resistant bacterial strains that present a major challenge to the efficacy of basic modern medicine: 80% of antibiotics in the United States are fed to farmed animals. Finally, the current overconsumption of animal products in many developed nations is also causing dietary health problems, with increasing incidence of coronary heart disease, cancer, type 2 diabetes, and stroke.

Current patterns of raising farmed animals are also problematic for the environment. Farmed livestock are a major and growing contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, representing 14.5% of global emissions according to a 2013 United Nations estimate (Gerber et al., 2013). The intensive farming of animals also causes local environmental problems. Animal manure releases ammonia and discharge from the lagoons of excrement created by large pig farms and cattle feedlots often escapes into local water supplies causing pollution and bacterial poisoning. [top p. 102]

On the basis of this short survey, it is readily apparent that the new patterns of raising animals intensively on an unprecedentedly large scale are causing very serious problems for farmed and wild animals, for human welfare, and for the environment. In the next and final section of this chapter, I consider the implications of viewing this practice through the lens of the encyclical's account of a Christian understanding of animals for evaluating this practice.

What are the implications of the encyclical for our use of animals for food?

In the first section of this chapter, I outlined three key features of *Laudato Si*'s discussion of animals: the celebration of our affective bonds of kinship with fellow creatures, the rejection of Christian teaching legitimizing human domination over other animals, and the affirmation of the place of animals in God's work of redemption. In the second section, I argued that the raising of animals for food was an obvious priority for attention, and then surveyed the ways in which modern industrial agriculture impacts on farmed and wild animals, humans, and the environment. In this final section, I argue that the encyclical's understanding of animals indicates the need for urgent changes in the rearing and consumption of animals that are left unaddressed by the encyclical.

The fundamental ethical question raised by the encyclical's discussion of animals is how we should we treat our kin, the sister and brother animal creatures *Laudato Si'* affirms as the object of God's loving care and who are moving with us to redemption in Christ. Given the multiplicity of our engagements with fellow animal creatures, the full answer to that question will be extensive and nuanced, but it is possible to identify some obvious and far-reaching conclusions on the basis of the major features of the use of animals for food surveyed above. Loving care for fellow animal creatures should mean a commitment to enabling their flourishing where we can, and certainly not subjecting them unnecessarily to impoverished lives and suffering. Industrialized animal agriculture very obviously fails to enable the flourishing of farmed animals, and very obviously subjects them unnecessarily to impoverished lives and suffering, as well as being a major contributor to the current mass extinction of wild animals. Raising other animals for food in this way cannot be justified in relation to human welfare because, as noted above, it is contrary to human interests as well: it exacerbates human food and water security by wasting a large proportion of global grain production and by using land and water resources inefficiently, subjects workers to high risks of physical and mental injury, and causes direct problems for human health. Sometimes, the exploitation of other animals for food has been justified on the basis of the need to feed a growing human population, but it is now clear for reasons noted above that raising and consuming animals as we are doing currently is an obstacle to such

[top p. 103]

efforts. Modern animal agriculture is also damaging for the environment, contributing significantly to climate change and pollution. If *Laudato Si'* is right that Christians must reject the tyrannical anthropocentrism that ignores our affective bonds with sister and brother animals

and recognizes that we need to attend to them alongside concern for human neighbors and the environment, Christians have obvious reason to resist the operations of industrialized animal agriculture.

Making the case that industrialized animal agriculture is both a very serious problem for humans, other animals, and the environment and at odds with the Christian vision of human relationships with fellow creatures outlined in *Laudato Si'* makes the encyclical's omission of any discussion of problems in our use of other animals for food notable. This is one of the most obvious examples of a practice exhibiting the unrestricted anthropocentrism and the lack of solidarity with our mother and sister earth and our sister and brother animal creatures that the encyclical rejects. Industrialized animal agriculture most clearly falls under the "irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed" the earth; most clearly contributes to "the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life"; and most clearly leads to the groaning of creation (2). On the basis of the analysis of the encyclical, Christians have a clear imperative to reconsider their complicity with a practice that is damaging to fellow animal creatures, to human welfare, and the environment.

Unlike many other complex issues confronting us, the actions Christians should take on the basis of *Laudato Si'* in relation to the animals we use for food are clear: we need to (1) reduce consumption of animal products and (2) move to higher welfare sourcing for the remaining products.

Reducing consumption is the crucial first step for a wide range of reasons. It would allow improvements in farmed animal welfare that are impossible at current levels of production; reduce the land used for animal agriculture and therefore protect habitat for wild animals; improve human food and water security; reduce risks from zoonotic diseases and antibiotic

resistance; and improve human dietary health. Individuals can contribute to reducing consumption in a variety of ways: such as eating animal products at fewer meals, or adopting a vegetarian or vegan diet. Corporately, Christians can act to reduce consumption by reconsidering the food served in churches or the food policies of other institutions informed by Christian values.

Moving to higher welfare sourcing of any animal products we continue to consume is a key second step. This will contribute to ensuring that farmed animals enjoy lives with more opportunity to flourish in the modes of life particular to them, which is fundamental to recognizing them, as the encyclical does, to be sister and brother creatures of the God Christians worship. This requires attention to the lives and deaths of the animals that are behind the products we consume. Labelling of products can help with such decisions by identifying for consumers products derived from animals that have been raised on pasture, allowed to range freely, and reared according to

[top p. 104]

organic certification schemes, but even better is to get to know and support local farmers seeking to provide good lives for the animals in their care. Such products will be more expensive than the products of industrial animal agriculture because it is the cruel industrial systems that make them cheap, but in association with reducing overall consumption of animal products, eating less and better animal products need not be more expensive.

In the first section of this chapter, I made the case that *Laudato Si'* is an important new statement of a Christian understanding of our relationship with fellow animal creatures. It celebrates a Franciscan recognition of our affective bonds of kinship with fellow creatures, it rejects Christian teaching legitimizing human domination over other animals, and it affirms the place of animals

in God's work of redemption in Jesus Christ. In the second section of the chapter, I set out the ways we are using animals for food currently, and the dire impacts of our practice for animals, humans, and the environment. In the third section, I argued that while the encyclical does not examine the implications of its theological account of animal creatures for modern industrial animal agriculture, this novel practice is a conspicuous example of the tyrannical anthropocentrism criticized by the encyclical and of the damage to our sister and brother creatures it condemns. As a result, Christians convinced by the encyclical to listen to the cries of the earth and her creatures have strong reasons urgently to rethink their practice by reducing their consumption of animal creatures and moving to higher welfare sources for animal products they continue to consume. In making such changes, Christians may participate in the ecological conversion for which the encyclical calls, and live into its vision of humans alongside other creatures as "a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect" (89).

References

Bar-On, Y. M., R. Phillips, and R. Milo. 2018. 'The Biomass Distribution on Earth'. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, USA.

Camosy, C. 2013. *For the Love of Animals: Christian Ethics, Consistent Action*. Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media.

Clough, D. 2019. *On Animals: Vol. II. Theological Ethics*. London: T&T Clark/Bloomsbury.

Gerber, P. J., H. Steinfeld, B. Henderson, A. Mottet, C. Opio, J. Dijkman, A. Falcucci, and G. Tempio. 2013. *Tackling Climate Change through Livestock: A Global Assessment of Emissions and Mitigation Opportunities.* Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Gladstone, R. 2014. "Dogs in Heaven? Pope Francis Leaves Pearly Gates Open". *New York Times*, 11 December.

Lotze, H. K., and B. Worm. 2019. “Historical Baselines for Large Marine Animals”. *Trends in Ecology and Evolution*. 24(5), 254–262.

Smil, V. 2011. “Harvesting the Biosphere: The Human Impact”. *Population and Development Review*. 37(4), 613–636.